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New Technologies, New Identities, and the Growth of Mass Opposition in the Arab Spring

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The recent revolutions known as the Arab Spring have been characterized as the products of social media. However, there is an alternative view that revolution takes place on the street or the battlefield and that the role of social media has been overstated. We argue that some new technologies can serve to facilitate rapid social change when they provide ways to overcome restrictions on the freedoms of expression and association. In doing so, communication technologies enable the formation of new social identities that can challenge existing social orders by promoting the growth of a social movement that is positioned as loyal to the nation and its people but opposed to the government. Our analyses focus on the role of social media in spreading video images of dissent and the links between this video material, satellite television, and mobile telephones in Tunisia and Egypt.

KEY WORDS: social media, revolution, social change, social identity, North Africa

The world has recently witnessed a series of dramatic and unexpected social changes in North Africa and the Middle East. These are complex events, and each of them involves equally complex political, social, and economic contexts, but a great deal of the commentary on these events has focused on the role of information and computing technology in mediating these social changes (following the publication on the Internet of a classified U.S. government document by WikiLeaks, 2010, detailing evidence of corruption in Tunisia). In this article, we present an analysis of the limits and possibilities of specific technologies for promoting change in Tunisia and Egypt and some preliminary tests of this analysis.

The surprising nature of the rapid growth of collective action in North Africa also presents some challenges for accounts of collective action. Contemporary research on collective action acknowledges the role of shared grievance in precipitating collective action as originally identified in research on fraternal relative deprivation (e.g., Runciman, 1966) but different approaches emphasize, to varying degrees, the importance of shared and individual interests (Klandermans, 1997; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Stürmer & Simon, 2009) and various mixtures of emotional reactions, efficacy beliefs, and social identities (for reviews, see Thomas, McGarty, & Mavor, 2009b; Thomas, Mavor, & McGarty, 2012; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; Wright, 2010). Recent research on extreme or nonnormative action (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009) also suggests that this occurs when low-status groups feel they have “nothing to lose” and in response to contempt for an out-group (Tausch et al., 2011). Thus, although the relative importance and causal order of the factors is disputed, collective action is more likely when people have shared interests, feel relatively deprived, are angry, believe they can make a difference, and strongly identify with relevant social groups (see van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). We assume that the collective action that led to social change in North Africa can be explained in terms of such factors, but what is less clear is why technological change would precipitate the conditions that led to such a rapid growth in the conditions for collective action. We can surmise that Tunisians in late 2010 became more aggrieved than they had been and that Egyptians were angry before they took to the streets in such large numbers, but, if so, why did so many people become aggrieved and angry so rapidly?

The Internet is clearly fertile ground for the display of social protest and political activism. However, beyond its use as a mechanism to publicize protest and revolution, some analysts have also proposed that the Internet can actually contribute to and facilitate social and political change. Kahn and Kellner (2004) suggested that the Internet provides spaces through which activists could envisage new forms of political possibility, while Postmes and Brunsting (2002) argued that the Internet is transforming collective action. Moreover, during its relatively recent history, there is evidence that social movements have exploited the potential for the Internet to not only facilitate interaction but also, potentially, as a medium for action in its own right (Carty & Onyett, 2006; Foot & Schneider, 2002; Gerhards & Rucht, 1992).

The events in North Africa and the Middle East in late 2010 and early 2011 have been described as “The Facebook Revolutions” (The Daily Caller, 2011). There is now extensive evidence that the use of social media and discussion of political topics was highly correlated with dramatic social change in Tunisia and Egypt (Howard et al., 2011; Khondker, 2011). Analyses of publicly available communication on social media such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook show that politically relevant communication surged before major protests and rallies (Lotan et al., 2011). Lotan et al. (2011) identified cycles in both Tunisia and Egypt where journalists retweeted content from activists and bloggers and vice versa. In Tunisia, where there was heavy media censorship, the cycle often started with activists who provided journalists with material for their tweets and articles.

Some critics, however, suggest that technology can be largely incidental to social change. For example, Gladwell (2011) noted that, “People protested and brought down governments before Facebook was invented. They did it before the Internet came along.” Similar debates have taken place about the role of new communications technologies and social networks, in particular, in the riots that occurred in several cities in the United Kingdom in August 2011 (see Reicher & Stott, 2011).

Indeed, the penetration of computing and telecommunications technologies in some countries such as Yemen (where there were widespread protests) is very low. As Morozov (2009) observed in relation to antigovernment protests in Iran that were represented as a Twitter revolution, only 0.026% of the Iranian population had a Twitter account in 2009 (see also Morozov, 2011, for a broader treatment); much of the activity originated outside Iran, and social media was also used by the government to maintain repression. Similar arguments were made earlier in different ways by Rodan (1998) and others.

It is also true that the actual mechanisms by which technology contributes to revolution have not yet been fully articulated. Howard and Hussain (2011) document that social media in Tunisia and Egypt helped activists to form networks, build social capital, and to organize protest action. These authors point to the online and other networks that activists had built over the years leading up to Arab Spring. This activism had been concentrated in educated, young, and largely middle-class groups. Such groups are very similar to those who have been at the forefront of revolutions in other settings. That is, consistent with relative deprivation theory, revolutions are often led not by those who are most oppressed in absolute terms. Howard and Hussain (2011) thus discuss digital media as providing social scaffolding for civil society and remind us that, although the changes in public view were very rapid, the backstory of revolution was long and intricate (see also Shehata, 2011).

However, the mechanisms by which social media could promote revolution are, as yet, underspecified. Indeed there are also good reasons to question the efficacy of social media for promoting and organizing (rather than just publicizing) revolution. These questions are especially pertinent for social media such as Twitter and communication media such as e-mail and satellite television. Media richness theory (MRT: Daft & Lengel, 1984) proposes that the most effective communications tend to involve communication media that are rich in nonverbal communication cues such as facial expression and vocal tone and which afford social presence (Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990) so that communication partners are aware of the other person and their relationship with them. In MRT terms, social media are *lean* because they carry few cues and would therefore seem ill-suited to planning and enacting complex processes such as those involved in popular revolution. How, for example, does the reader of a text message calling for mass protest against a regime judge whether the message is sincere or ironic?

In this article, we propose some of the social psychological mechanisms that can underlie rapid technologically mediated social change and provide preliminary tests of these ideas in two North African countries. Our analysis has developed iteratively from previous historical examples, existing theoretical perspectives, and observations of the events in North Africa in late 2010 and early 2011. In developing the analysis, we do not suggest that it is fully and equally applicable to all of the recent events in North Africa and the Middle East. Our analysis therefore centers on the urbanized protests in Tunisia and Egypt rather than the civil wars in Libya and Syria.

The core of our argument is that the application of specific technological change in Tunisia and Egypt contributed to an acceleration of processes that normally occur much more slowly. In the simplest terms, we propose that these popular revolutions involved the rapid growth of a mass opposition (a new social movement) that became united in the cause of removing the government from power. We conceive of this as a process of social identity formation where opponents of the government increasingly came to see the government (and its supporters) as an out-group that needed to be replaced for the good of the nation. We argue that technological change does not produce social change but bypasses the mechanisms that block the growth of opposition and its alignment to national identity. In the next section, we elaborate upon the ways in which authoritarian regimes block dissent.

Understanding Opposition and Repression

The removal or limitation of oppositions is the hallmark of authoritarian regimes. Thus, oppositions in authoritarian regimes tend to be small and divided. Such oppositions are often underground movements, and opposition leaders frequently live abroad beyond the easy reach of the regime's security apparatus. Indeed, as Blondel (1997) notes, by the time oppositions in authoritarian regimes are large, the regime is already on the way out. From Blondel's (1997) reconsideration of Dahl's classic work, we can derive the principle that successful oppositions tend to be large and cohesive. The question is how do oppositions become large and cohesive?

Paradoxically, the literature on repression points to the answers. Davenport (2007) proposes that repression is the standard response to a regime that faces a behavioral challenge. As Fjelde (2010) documents, the main strategies used by authoritarian regimes involve coercion (eliminating or silencing opponents) or cooptation (sharing power or spoils with possible opponents).

Tellingly, Davenport (2007) also suggests that, although we know that authoritarian regimes respond to challenges by increasing coercion and reducing freedoms, and that repression has mixed effects in limiting opposition (in that coercion may serve to either increase and reduce opposition), less is known about what those regimes hope to achieve by imposing repression. Here we propose that there is a hydraulic relationship between attempted repression and opposition. Successful repression serves to keep opposition movements small and divided. This is achieved by eliminating, coopting, or driving away the opposition of political parties and other institutions (restricting freedom of association) and by placing sharp limits on the communication of dissent (restricting freedom of expression).

Limits on freedom of association and freedom of expression also limit two major modes of communicative conduct that McGarty, Lala, and Douglas (2011) term *broadcast* and *gathering*. Prior to the widespread use of printing technology, the only way to broadcast a message was to shout it to an assembled mass of people (before a battle, in a town square, or a place of worship). Thus, the best way to spread a point of view was to gather people in one place and talk to them. Authorities would therefore limit such gatherings and control what was said to them. Technological change has created many new ways for people both to broadcast and to gather. As with face-to-face gatherings and public addresses, these new technologies can be used by both authorities and their opponents.

The effects of repression on stifling opposition in authoritarian regimes can also be considered by analogy by examining the growth of social movements in liberal democratic contexts. Klandermans and Oegama (1987) identify four stages of action mobilization (1) becoming sympathetic to a cause (or part of the mobilization potential for a cause), (2) becoming a target for mobilization attempts, (3) becoming motivated to participate, and (4) overcoming barriers to participation. Repression impedes the work of opposition activists at every stage, but our focus here is on the limits of the mobilization potential of a cause.

We assume that mass opposition forms when a large number of people are able to evaluate their circumstances and agree that they are unsatisfactory. To the extent that they experience this at a collective level as a disadvantage that has been unfairly caused by some other group of people, then, in line with relative deprivation theory (group or fraternal relative deprivation [Runciman, 1966]; for a review, see Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012), we expect this to motivate action. Similarly, Simon and Klandermans' (2001) model of politicized collective identity assumes a contest between supporters and opponents of a regime for support from a third party (that could be the general public or the international community). People who have a grievance are able to convey their concerns to others. Observation and discussion allows people to gauge whether their grievance is shared by other people and, if not, to convince those other people that they should hold the same grievance.

Limits on free expression, however, not only prevent activists from organizing protests and recruiting sympathizers (due to the risks of punishment), but they also prevent the public from accurately gauging the level of support for a cause. If it is believed to be dangerous to express dissent, it will be difficult to determine whether that dissenting view is widely shared by others.

The social psychological solution to oppression is united action. In the recent social identity model of resistance, Haslam and Reicher (2012) focus on the importance of deploying social identities in order to generate cognitive alternatives and to plan action for social change. Haslam and Reicher's model, however, has been developed in relation to resistance by incarcerated groups. In these circumstances, there is a relatively clear existing social identity to draw upon and to use to

mobilize. In the case of an incipient opposition movement facing oppression from its own government, no such identity is readily available.

Indeed, the problem facing opposition movements that seek to overthrow the government of their own country is the taint of illegitimacy that comes from attacking a national government that is wrapped in national symbols, controls national institutions, and which represents critics as being disloyal to the nation. This is a different problem to that faced by a national liberation movement seeking to overthrow a foreign power, a regional independence movement, or a group-rights movement, where there are existing social identities available for the revolutionaries to draw on that are less readily available for opponents to use.

We propose that the formation of mass-opposition movements involves a process by which opponents of the government come to see themselves as a coherent social group—that is, to see opposition to the government as a basis for common cause so that opponents see themselves as being on one side of an intergroup conflict and the government and its supporters on the other side. We conceptualize these as opinion-based groups (OBGs; Bliuc, McGarty, Reynolds, & Muntele, 2007; McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009). OBGs based around mass-opposition movements need to form in a way that potential challenges to their legitimacy are defeated. If they do, we expect that to boost the mobilization potential of the social movement in order to recruit other supporters. A key aspect of our argument is that lean communication media can be well suited to the formation of these emergent social groups in some contexts.

Unifying and Growing Social Movements through Opinion-Based Groups

Opinion-based groups are groups that have a social identity based on a shared opinion, that is, where two or more people perceive themselves to be the same because they agree with each other and not simply because they share their race, nationality, ethnicity, or gender. Opinion-based groups exist alongside group memberships based on categories and institutions and form where some shared opinion is not seen as a coincidental covariation so that “you” and “I” might happen to agree, but rather, it becomes a basis for dividing “us” from “them” (O’Brien & McGarty, 2009). Under this view, the debate about abortion is a genuine intergroup conflict, but it is not a conflict between men and women, or between Christians and non-Christians, but between groups based around contrasting pro-Choice and pro-Life positions. The concept of the opinion-based group was developed to help understand the way in which abstract notions become attributes of a group of people who internalize them as core features of their in-group that they are willing to act upon. Of course, such opinion-based groups have long been a subject of study in areas such as group polarization and minority influence, but, until the work of Bliuc et al. (2007), they attracted very little interest in relation to collective action.

There is good evidence that participation in opinion-based groups produces psychological transformations that impact on behavior, beliefs, and emotions. For example, social identification with an opinion-based group is an excellent predictor of intentions to take politically relevant action in support of or against the government (Bliuc et al., 2007), and opinion-based groups are associated with distinctively relevant group-based emotional reactions to government policies about the War on Terror (Musgrove & McGarty, 2008). Such groups are perceived to be real groups by their members (Bliuc et al., 2007, often with norms that sharply contrast from other groups; Cameron & Nickerson, 2009; O’Brien & McGarty, 2009), and they differ in their content and expressions of identity in relation to ethnic conflict within a society (Bliuc, McGarty, Hartley, & Muntele, 2012). Finally, such memberships can be intensified to promote support for social change for the benefit of other people using group interaction (Gee, Khalaf, & McGarty, 2007; Thomas & McGarty, 2009).

We argue that a great deal of sociopolitical action can be understood as attempts by opinion-based groups to dominate a society or its relevant institutions (McGarty et al., 2009). We

conceptualize this as a special case of bottom-up identity formation where these groups seek to impose a specific category definition over alternative ones (in the terms used by Reicher, Cassidy, Wolpert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006) so that part of the group represents the whole (see Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999). In other words, opinion-based groups often strive to align themselves with positively valued social categories or institutions within the society in which they operate, and this defines their political success. To the extent to which it becomes true to say that “what it means to be a member of a positively valued category X is to believe opinion Y (that is endorsed by group Z),” then opinion-based group Z has achieved political success within category X.

Good examples of these processes occur in liberal democratic politics where a political opinion-based group attempts to become aligned with the majority position in some constituency, so that the political opinion-based group comes to stand for that nation or region. For example, in the Australian political debate about support for the mandatory detention of asylum seekers in 2001, major political parties have sought to portray their support for mandatory detention as protecting the nation (see O’Brien & McGarty, 2009). Patriotism may be the last refuge of the scoundrel, but it is also an early port of call for almost anyone who wishes to achieve political success at the national level.

The powerful consequence of the alignment of opinion and other identities is that, just as endorsement of opinion becomes an expression of loyalty, so disagreement can come to be equated with disloyalty. This was infamously captured in the U.S. House (of Representatives) Committee on Un-American Activities between 1945 and 1975 that came to equate real, or suspected, disagreement with certain orthodox political views as being equivalent to subversion.

How do such groups overcome the taint of disloyalty? Simon and Klandermans (2001, p. 326) adapt the arguments of the in-group projection model of Mummendey and Wenzel (1999) to assert:

... we hold that the collective identity of the members of an aggrieved group who engage in adversarial attributions finally politicizes to the extent that these group members try to transform the confrontation into a more comprehensive power struggle forcing society at large to take sides either with their in-group or with their opponent. *This implies that they acknowledge or even stress their identity as a member of that society because only by virtue of their membership in this more inclusive group or community are they entitled to societal support for their claims* (Wenzel, 2000). (Simon & Klandermans, 2001, p. 326; emphasis added)

Simon and Klandermans (2001) thus locate the rhetorical battle over an inclusive (national) identity as key to popular mobilization. Indeed, these arguments provide crucial context to the confusion around identities that we noted at the beginning of this article: there is confusion around the identities, politics, and objectives of reformers precisely because these were hotly contested. And, far from being irrelevant or descriptive features of a conflict, contestation of national identity is a key mechanism by which groups are mobilized and social change enacted (see Reicher, Hopkins, Levine, & Rath, 2005).

We go beyond this though to argue that a critical social psychological precondition for those changes is the formation or transformation of social identity that is compatible with organizing and sustaining protest action (Thomas et al., 2009a). Thus, in addition to being important for reaching and expressing consensus about grievances and means, as well as being vital for creating the appearance and reality of unity of purpose that conveys political will, social interaction is especially important for forging identity. This point was made clearly by Postmes and colleagues in research on the interactive model of identity formation (Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005; Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005). Existing identities can be deduced and applied in a top-down manner (understanding who we are by understanding which groups we already belong to), but such processes tend to be conservative in the sense that they reassert what already exists in society. In contrast, new (potentially

revolutionary) identities can be created from the bottom up through social interaction between people. Social interaction does more than help identities form: it also galvanizes them. It can help identities become fit for difficult purposes such as confronting powerful authorities. As Thomas and McGarty (2009) have demonstrated, such social interaction can strengthen identities that are oriented towards cooperation and generosity by helping people to become more committed to take action to reduce poverty in the developing world. Smith and Postmes (2009, 2011; Postmes & Smith, 2009; Thomas, Smith, McGarty, & Postmes, 2010) show the other side of this coin. Social interaction in small groups can also help to solidify commitment to hostile, antisocial action. More broadly, social interaction allows the coordination and internalization of politicized collective identities and forges the potential for a subgroup of people within a nation who have revolutionary ideas to contest the government for “ownership” of the national identity (see Reicher et al., 2005; Reicher et al., 2006).

Thomas et al.’s (2009a) normative alignment model addresses the final piece of the puzzle by arguing that efficacy beliefs, emotional reactions, and collective action intentions become integrated through social interaction as norms of groups. That is, feeling angry about the government and believing that protest are even more likely to be implicated in opposition when those reactions express collective self-hood. Indeed, we would expect that when these factors exist in isolation (e.g., a person who feels angry but believes protesting is pointless or sees their grievance against the government in individual terms), then collective action is unlikely to take place. In other words, the factors that have been shown to predict collective action such as sense of injustice, efficacy, and identity are not alternatives to our analysis but part of that analysis.

These ideas provide a psychological basis for understanding the growth in participation in mass protest. It is useful now to turn in more detail to the ways these processes involve communication technology and the dynamics that these technologies bring to the dissemination of dissent.

The Mass Dissemination of Dissent

We noted earlier that communication media such as text messages and e-mail seem like clumsy tools for fomenting revolution due to the absence of nonverbal cues and low social presence provided by these media. However, as Swaab and colleagues have recently suggested, if communicators already have a cooperative orientation towards each other, as commonly seen amongst revolutionaries who share opinions about the need for revolution, the presence of sight, sound, and synchronicity in communication channels will not affect the decisions that the group makes (Swaab, Galinsky, Medvec, & Diermeier, 2012). The leanness of the social media also matches some of the task requirements in the organization of popular protests where the aim is to broadcast a message rapidly to as many people as possible. Thus the leanness of the medium is matched to the task for optimum “productivity” (meeting the goal of the communication, cf. Daft & Lengel, 1984).

Lean communication media can also allow communicators to be nonidentifiable or anonymous. The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE; Reicher et al., 1995) proposes that when group memberships are salient, anonymity can help to maintain unity and thereby bolster group processes such as polarization, social attraction, and conformity. Further, the inability of powerful out-group members to punish in-group members will enable salient group memberships to produce stronger adherence to punishable group norms (such as expressing dissent; this is the strategic dimension of SIDE). In an experimental demonstration of these points, Spears, Lea, Corneliussen, Postmes, and Ter Haar (2002) showed that resistance to powerful out-groups can be bolstered by social support in the form of e-mails from in-group members.

More recent work in this tradition has pointed to the communicative power of participating in and observing mass protest. The elaborated social identity model of crowd behavior (ESIM: Drury & Reicher, 2000) proposes that crowds achieve common purpose and take common action by forming common identities. That is, through participation in a crowd, the members of that crowd can

come to perceive themselves in terms of a collective identity, and this can become a basis for action at that time and in the future. A key basis for identity formation in this model is the action of external parties such as the police. Confrontational action by the police, for example, can unite a crowd that was otherwise divided in a common (and, in our terms, opinion-based) identity.

We follow ESIM in assuming that participation in protest has communicative consequences for participants and for witnesses of protest. Mass protest action shows that dissent is endorsed as a social consensus amongst the participants and, to the extent that that dissent is perceived to be widespread, thus represents a challenge to the legitimacy of an alternative consensus represented by support for the government. As argued in the theory of minority influence (Moscovici, 1976, 1980) consistent disagreement (conveying certainty) with an orthodox view provides a powerful challenge to it by leading observers to seek to understand the basis of the disagreement (see McGarty, Turner, Oakes, & Haslam, 1993; Turner, 1991).

For an authoritarian regime, mass dissent carries an additional risk. Dissent not only conveys widespread disagreement, but it also demonstrates that members of the population are so committed to the cause that they will take protest action despite the risk of punishment. It also raises the possibility that the regime is unwilling, or unable, to engage in repression, and this may serve to lower the barriers for participation in protests (Step 4 in the Klandermans & Oegama, 1987, model). Prior to mass media, people could only learn about protests by witnessing them or hearing about them. Television has massively extended the potential reach of dissent, but a key component of repression in authoritarian regimes has been the strict control of media by limiting press freedoms to record and broadcast views that disagree with the government or to show images of protest.

This is in line with the idea that societal change/revolutions and innovation in technology are closely linked as proposed by the theory of human development (Welzel, Inglehart, & Klingemann, 2003). The improved access to information allowed by the newly developed technologies is linked to value change and “civic exchange” that “strengthen horizontal bargaining relations and weaken vertical authority relations that restrict human autonomy” (Welzel et al., 2003, p. 342). In times of societal changes, people tend to develop “emancipative orientations”—broader tendencies that imply inclinations to civic protest, liberty aspirations, and trust in people—that then lead to the mobilization of the masses “channeled in the direction of democratization, helping to terminate an authoritarian regime and to establish freedom rights” (p. 348).

Two specific technological developments are particularly important in relation to North Africa. First, international Arab-language broadcasters such as Al Jazeera were independent of the governments of Tunisia and Egypt but were accessible through satellite receivers in both those countries. Although Al Jazeera’s reporters were banned from Tunisia, Miladi (2011) estimated that 50% of the televisions in Tunisia in 2010 were tuned to international satellite networks. Content appearing on networks such as Al Jazeera is also available through websites, and the contents of broadcast into other countries (such as France where there is a large expatriate Tunisian community) could be relayed by telephone to people without television or internet access.

Second, it has become much easier to publish video content through websites such as YouTube. This second development creates many pathways of dissemination. Material that is uploaded can be viewed directly by other users: it can be transferred to other users by mobile devices (e.g., by e-mail) where it can be directly shown to other users, through blogs, and by broadcast on television. This last mechanism is particularly important because TV networks were prevented from recording protests in Tunisia. Although video sharing is a lean medium in MRT terms, video evidence of dramatic or controversial events allows viewers to be “present” in those events in a way that a verbal or written description does not. Thus video can be an immersive and emotionally engaging medium (but, as with verbal and written descriptions, the content can be distorted or contrived).

We explore here the prospect of these mechanisms for proliferating mass dissent in Tunisia and Egypt in late 2010 and early 2011. Although it is not possible to demonstrate that the dissemination

of dissent produced social change, we seek to demonstrate that there was a massive increase in the dissemination of dissent in Tunisia and Egypt through the video representation of protests against authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. We argue that this is consistent with the formation of an oppositional opinion-based group where opponents of the government increasingly came to see the government and its supporters as an out-group.

Our second key proposition is that the growth of the mass-opposition identity was shaped by attempts to position dissent as a loyal nationalist movement. That is, the protests were presented as national liberation movements that contested the government's version of national loyalty by aligning the protest with national symbols (in particular the flag).

Third, the response of regimes should take the form of attempts to (1) block the dissemination of dissent through new media, (2) organize manifestations of popular support and (3) challenge the alignment between the opposition and the national identity by seeking to question the legitimacy of the opposition.

YouTube, Al Jazeera, and Mobile Phones in Tunisia and Egypt

Howard and Hussain (2011) identify four phases in the role of digital media in the Arab Spring. The preparation phase where activists built networks, the ignition phase where an incident (that was ignored by state media but came to attention through online media and created outrage), the street protest phase, the international buy-in phase and the climax. We focus on the dissemination of dissent at the start of large street protests in Sidi Bouzid on December 17 and in Egypt from January 25 (the Day of National Outrage) to January 28, 2011 (when the Egyptian government cut off most Internet services).

The use of technology to spread dissent can be seen from the beginning of the Tunisian protest. We can track this by following two segments of video filmed on December 17, 2010 and exploring the interaction with the Arabic-language satellite broadcaster, Al Jazeera, and their new website in the period immediately following the self-immolation of fruit vendor Mohammed Bouazizi outside the regional government headquarters in the town of Sidi Bouzid.

The first video (TheTunisietunisia, 2010b) attracted 152,894 views on YouTube. Most of these views occurred within a few days of its upload on December 18, 2010. It shows a protest shortly after the self-immolation and was filmed from almost the exact location that Bouazizi set himself on fire. The video shows the spread of various forms of peaceful dissent over the course of three minutes including people sitting down in the square, whistling, and chanting. The start of the video shows one person talking on the telephone and one person filming the protest. Three minutes into the video, there are at least six camera phones shown filming from the same angle. Thus, over a very short period of time, people were not only agreeing on ways to express dissent to other people at the gathering (through chants and gestures), but they were rapidly converging on the means to broadcast dissent to other people who were not present (and this mirrors processes that occur at concerts and sporting events). This video was also uploaded to the Al Jazeera website.

At some levels the content of the video is unremarkable. Much of the Arabic audio content is difficult to make out, and neither the crowd nor the police are shown taking aggressive acts. Nonetheless, the content is remarkable within the cultural context in which it was created because mass public dissent was so rare on the streets of Tunisian towns before December 17, 2010.

We do not know whether all of the camera viewpoints were disseminated, and we suspect that several were shared by various informal networks, but the view point of one other camera can be seen in another video (abirget, 2010) which attracted only 1,649 views on YouTube. This second viewpoint, however, was broadcast on Al Jazeera in Arabic along with commentary (TheTunisietunisia, 2010a), and it was then downloaded to YouTube where it attracted 65,667 views. There are no reliable figures in the public domain for Al Jazeera's audience penetration before or after December

2010, but we believe that the images and existence of dissent was relayed to thousands of homes through the combination of the handheld devices, the YouTube site, and, especially, satellite television. The YouTube popularity statistics for all of these videos show that the protest images were more widely viewed in Tunisia than in any other country.

The links between YouTube and Al Jazeera demonstrate a mechanism by which localized protest that would normally be witnessed by only a small number of people (due to the prohibition of TV cameras) was rapidly broadcast to a large number of people across Tunisia in the period immediately after December 17. The content of these broadcasts shows consensual public dissent outside a government headquarters despite the presence of a large number of police officers. We propose that this provided a platform for the subsequent rapid growth of opposition by revealing that dissent was widespread and that protests could occur. It also shows another interesting normalization process where the communication of dissent (recording the events for transmission to others) appeared to become a critical element of a protest.

The content uploaded as early as December 17 in Sidi Bouzid shows classic images of inter-group conflict and are readily interpreted in terms of ESIM. The action of the opponent is shown to be increasingly unified and organized. Given that it constitutes intergroup conflict, the question then is which groups are in conflict. There is no obvious way of explaining the groups in conflict purely in terms of class, religion, ethnicity, region, or membership of political parties, though all of these factors are relevant. We propose that the most parsimonious way to understand the conflict is one between opponents and supporters of the Ben Ali government. The events in Tunisia, therefore, represent a process whereby what was, for many people, an incipient conflict based on a difference of opinion became an intergroup conflict. The representation of protest in the video content (whether accessed by the Internet, television, or other means) provided a basis to see the opposition as large, committed, and cohesive, and this provided a platform for its further growth.

Very similar dynamics can be seen in Egypt. From mid-December 2010 to January 2011, reports of protest and successful revolution in Tunisia had been broadcast through al Jazeera and other media including social media in Egypt. Egyptians therefore had successful examples to draw on that, we must assume, boosted the perceived efficacy of protest actions.

We have tracked the YouTube viewings of videos produced by Daily News Egypt, an independent (English language) newspaper. The YouTube channel shows 14 videos uploaded between April 6, 2010 (the second anniversary of the April 6 general strike) and November 28, 2010 displaying protest action aimed at the authorities. These videos attracted between 504 and 24,289 views with an average of 7,557.6 views. Between January 2, 2011 and February 11, 2011, the same channel showed 10 more videos of street protests which attracted 806,725 views, increasing in popularity by a factor of more than 10. All of the videos were most popular in Egypt, and this suggests that in the period of January 25 through January 28 (when the government blocked YouTube) there was a rapid growth of images of dissent within Egypt.

It is also possible to identify a keystone YouTube posting that appears to be analogous to the Sidi Bouzid videos discussed above. A video uploaded on January 25 (piparsy, 2011) is 1 minute and 46 seconds in duration and shows a large protest in Tahrir Square. This video was embedded on Facebook and attracted 439,000 viewings (again the video was most popular in Egypt). Most of these viewings were in the period leading up to January 28, 2011, but crucially, more than 200,000 viewings were on mobile devices, and this points to the role of mobile phones and similar devices not only in recording dissent (as in Tunisia) but in receiving it.

We regard this video as a keystone because it points to another path of dissemination of dissent. In Egypt, it is plausible that mobile phones complemented the satellite TV broadcasts of dissent in the period between January 25 and January 28, 2011 before the blockage of social media services. It is worth noting though that the key initiating protests in Egypt were in the center of a city with a population that is hundreds of times larger than that of Sidi Bouzid. Images of the protest could be

expected to spread in Cairo to large numbers of people by word of mouth. On the other hand, in the small regional town of Sidi Bouzid, the combination of video upload and satellite television and the Al Jazeera website opened a new channel for communication.

Aligning National Identity with Protest

Consistent with our second proposition, protesters represented their movement as national liberation movements serving the interests of the people in media and gatherings. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the prodemocracy movements have described their movements in these terms and have eschewed debates between, for example, secularists and Islamists. In Egypt, for example, the previous divide between secularists and the Islamist opposition parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood was seen as a meaningless distraction (Murphy, 2011), so that the protests could be described as neither religious nor secular. Although there were critical levels of communication and solidarity between the protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt and elsewhere (including the reproduction of methods and tactics; see Howard & Hussain, 2011), the movements cannot be seen as transnational prodemocracy or anticorruption movements or as pan-Arabism.

The rapid alignment of national symbols can also be seen in the YouTube content. Not surprisingly due to the spontaneous nature of the events, there are no national flags carried by the protesters on December 17 in Sidi Bouzid. In video content uploaded in the following weeks, however, the videos are strewn with national flags. By early January of 2011, there were numerous videos that portray national symbols and national songs. A good example is a video by Freedom4Tunisia (2011) that runs an audio track while showing the Tunisian flag and attracted 487,000 views.

In Egypt, the protests from January 25, 2011 were clearly aligned with national identity (and this may reflect drawing on the Tunisian experience as the protests shown on the Daily News Egypt channel in 2010 show few flags). The keystone video from Tahrir Square almost continuously depicts national flags and focuses on these images. Widely disseminated YouTube videos, therefore, served from the outset of the protests to represent the protests as aligned with national identity in a highly visible way.

Regime Responses

In line with our third proposition, clear attempts by the regimes to ban or block the social media have been widely reported. The Threat Level blog (part of Wired magazine) showed that the Tunisian government blocked YouTube, but proxy servers were established (Tunisia, Wired blog). The International Committee to Protect Journalists (2010) cited acts of repression in 2010 against journalists and bloggers and then wrote to the President of Tunisia in 2011 to itemize these complaints (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2011). More recent empirical work documents the peaks and troughs of traffic as a function of repressive interference (Howard et al., 2011; Lotan et al., 2011). Steps were also taken to directly control media in response to protests in Tunisia and Egypt. For example, Google's Global Transparency Report (n.d.) shows that Egypt's share of worldwide Google traffic declined to almost zero for five days in late January and early February 2011 when access to Google services was cut by the Egyptian Government during the protests. The Egyptian government also shut down the offices of Al Jazeera in Egypt, cancelled the accreditation of the network's journalists, and ended the transmission of Al Jazeera's Arabic channel in Egypt. Journalists were also attacked and/or detained by police (Miles, 2011).

There is widespread evidence that the threatened regimes organized their own counter demonstrations and protests in Egypt. Widespread attention was also focused on the progovernment rallies in Egypt, including the attack by riders mounted on camels and horses on February 2, 2011 (senior members of the Mubarak government have been charged with organizing these attacks, though this matter was before the courts; Shalaby, 2011).

The regimes also challenged alignment by accusing dissenters of being terrorists and members of other categories. Tunisian president Ben Ali argued that dissenters were not representative of the nation and of the interests of Tunisians:

While these events were triggered by one social case, of which we understand the circumstances and psychological factors and whose consequences are regrettable, the exaggerated turn that these events have taken, as a result of their political manipulation by some sides who do not wish good to the homeland and resort to some foreign television channels which broadcast false and unchecked allegations and rely on dramatisation, fabrication and defamation hostile to Tunisia, requires from us to clarify some issues and confirm the truths that must be taken into consideration . . .

and

It is not acceptable that a minority of extremists and agitators in the pay of others, and against the country's interests, resort to violence and street disturbances as means of expression. (Ben Ali, 2010)

The protests in Egypt were described as being inspired by Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood (Shenker & Whitaker, 2011) or by anarchic and mysterious forces. In early February, Egyptian President Mubarak echoed the rhetoric of Ben Ali:

. . . unfortunate clashes, mobilised and controlled by political forces that wanted to escalate and worsen the situation . . . They targeted the nation's security and stability through acts of provocation, theft and looting and setting fires and blocking roads and attacking vital installations and public and private properties and storming some diplomatic missions. (Mubarak, 2011).

Interestingly, it is easier to find striking evidence of critiques of the opposition in the terms we propose in other countries where there has been civil war or no change of government (in Bahrain: Abdo & Ali, 2011; Al Jazeera, 2011; in Libya: Ayad, 2011; and in Syria: Al-Assad, 2012). We suspect this is partly because the longer time period of those revolutions has allowed more opportunity for those processes to emerge due to the specific identity dynamics in those societies. Due to the religious division in Bahrain between Shia and Sunni Muslims, it was plausible to represent the opposition as being agents of a foreign force in a way that makes less sense in Tunisia and Egypt, but it may also be the case that this tactic has helped bolster some regimes.

Conclusion

In summary, the evidence from the recent revolutions is consistent with the propositions. Technologies enabled mobilization and identity formation, and these were countered with alternative mobilization strategies and new forms of repression. It is crucial to note that our account does not suggest that social media created the challenge to the North African regimes. The proximal and direct cause of the downfall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt was mass protest action. We would expect that if those protests had remained in the domain of social media then the targeted regimes would still be in place.

At the heart of our account is the idea that the events in Tunisia and Egypt represented the rapid intensification of conflicts between supporters and opponents of the governments of those countries. One thing that technological change did was to make it easier for opponents of the government to

mobilize mass support for their cause through participation in street protests so that transformations that can take decades (as in South Africa) occurred in weeks. This is not to say that the events in North Africa should only be understood as intergroup conflict, or in social psychological terms, or that the only effect of technology was to intensify an intergroup conflict. As Howard and Hussain (2011) detail, digital media helped activists to organize, to build social capital, and to seek international support. If activists had used technology only in these ways without igniting mass popular support for change, we suspect that the governments would still be in power.

A rapid rise in support for an opposition is no guarantee of success. Opposition movements in liberal democracies also have the capacity to grow rapidly, but we do not always expect such opposition movements to be successful, so we should not make the mistake of assuming that similar processes will make change inevitable in different circumstances.

Rather, our analysis leads to two very different points. First, some technological changes increase the capacity of people with revolutionary aims to engage in covert broadcast and to gather and circumvent the efforts of repressive regimes to prevent dissent and social organization. This enables action to move from the screens to the streets. Second, new revolutionary groups often align their revolutionary identity with national identity.

It may seem easy to overstate the impact of technology in communities where the majority does not have access to that technology, but we could point to the example of Germany in the Reformation where perhaps one person in 20 could read (and an even smaller proportion could write) but could still access printed pamphlets by viewing illustrations and by listening to public readings and retellings (MacCulloch, 2004; Matheson, 2004). Satellite television and mobile devices extended the reach of social media in analogous ways here.

Finally, our approach also suggests a cautionary note about the prospect of success of mass-opposition movements. Our thesis is that new technologies produce the social conditions that enable a type of identity formation in repressive societies that already exist in pluralistic societies. As the evidence from these pluralistic societies suggest, the existence of mass opposition does not guarantee a change of government, and in no society has a change of government been demonstrated to be a panacea for social ills. Critics of social change movements in emerging democracies should bear this in mind when setting standards for assessing their effectiveness.

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